



A Union of Professionals

A Support Staff-Forward Vision for Reopening

As we head toward virtual and hybrid school start dates, we have the opportunity to create a learning environment where our students can thrive. Our school support staff—from paraprofessionals to bus drivers—play an important role in helping our students and our schools thrive in this new environment.

This document is intended to help you advocate in innovative ways for school support staff to do the important work of helping our students succeed during these uncertain times.

This plan is not only inclusive of support staff, but it honors the essential role they have played during the pandemic while looking toward what necessary and essential roles they will fill in the future.

We must be nimble and creative. We must be innovative and forward-thinking. We must remind people that we are critical to the success of our students and our schools. And to that end, below are possible ways support staff can help facilitate positive learning in the virtual environment. In some of the items here, there is an underlying need to provide technology and training for support staff. Districts will need to be held accountable to provide this.

We would love additional ideas and feedback. What are you doing? What could we do differently? Please share ideas with us at: psrp@aft.org.

Other AFT reopening documents and resources to help you understand safety implications and best practices can be found here:

- <https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/reopening-school-buildings.pdf>
- https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/covid19_reopen-america-schools.pdf
- <https://www.aft.org/coronavirus>

Classroom Support

It can be difficult to create and sustain an engaging learning environment in the virtual classroom. Basic things we take for granted, like reading body language and using classroom materials, are so much more difficult in the virtual classroom. When thoughtfully integrated, paraprofessionals are a huge and invaluable part of the virtual classroom. Of course, they will also need their districts to step up and ensure technology, equipment and training is provided.

See ways support staff are making a difference in learning environments below.

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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- Paraprofessionals play an essential role in making virtual learning a success. They can help teachers and students with online tools, videos, breakout groups and one-on-one support. They can monitor chats among students, helping to make sure all students are engaged in the learning process.
- Support staff can support breakout groups and interventions both before and after online instruction, ideally with three to five kids. Paras could work with counselors and teachers to make virtual interventions more successful.
- Multiple classes can be instructed at once virtually with the aid of support staff monitoring and working with small groups to ensure that every student is getting the most of their online learning experience.
- Paraprofessionals can read questions out loud to students, manage chats, help manage the class and support continuing the lesson if the teacher has technical issues.
- Support staff can help with taking attendance, provided they are given access to the attendance programs used.
- Support staff can hold small-group office hours and instructional assistance for different subject areas.
- Paraprofessionals can assist their teachers by collaborating on documents to provide additional educational resources for families to use with their children. These include worksheets, study guides, infographics or Boardmaker graphics for students who rely on visual support.
- Paraprofessionals can hold virtual study/homework support sessions at various times throughout the day. Many households have limited connectivity and several students may need to use a single computer. Providing multiple sessions or checkpoints throughout the day is critical to ensure all students fully engage in virtual learning and receive individualized attention and support. Additionally, this allows for age-appropriate technology usage with greater ease.

Social/Emotional Support for Students and Families

Support staff are integral to the social and emotional support students receive in school. Staff are often the first people students see and check in with throughout the day. Below are new ways for PSRPs to support the social and emotional learning of students when blended or virtual education is in place.

Connecting students and families to school resources

- Paraprofessionals and other support staff can support students and families in virtual learning with consistent contact via email and telephone, especially given that many support staff are multilingual and can make greater connections with families in a variety of languages.
- All support staff could be sending communication (e.g. physical mail) to parents and families to keep them informed and connected socially. For example, notes of encouragement to students on behalf of their teachers and paras can boost relationships between schools and families.

Ensuring no student falls between the cracks

- Support staff can be effective liaisons between students/families and school social emotional supports such as social workers, counselors etc. Creating a web of feedback between the families and these social emotional supports could be an effective way to better engage students who are struggling with the transition to virtual learning.

- Support staff could call homes to check on students who aren't attending classes to problem-solve, make sure they can attend class and connect them to social emotional resources, mental health providers and any other services they may need. They can also observe and participate in family-led learning to be able to better understand and support a student.

Facilitating individual attention for students

- Support staff could provide students support over calls, providing somewhat more individualized emotional support.
- Support staff duos or small teams could visit families at home and conduct socially distant one-on-one support for students who need in-person attention.

Non-Classroom Support Staff

Food service workers and custodians were and are on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools should look to engage all support staff in the reality of operating school without a brick and mortar school being full of students, or unpredictably switching between virtual and in-person instruction. We must all be flexible and innovative to meet the needs of our school communities. Below are ways that non-classroom support staff can continue to do their essential work.

- Buildings can be used as a space for essential childcare.
- Custodians can continue their regular building duties, in addition to preparing buildings for a physical reopening, and continue their summer deep-cleaning work. If any part of the school grounds or building is expected to be in use, even if reopening is virtual, proper safety and PPE are of the utmost importance.
- Bus drivers and attendants can establish a bus delivery service including food, supplies and in-person intervention on a small scale.
- Administrative assistants could work as backups for teachers—for example, they could help monitor the chat room for classes and help address any technical issues that arise.
- Bus drivers could assist food service workers in delivering and opening mobile food pick-up. There may be students who want to buy school meals, even if they don't receive free and reduced meals.
- Buses can be outfitted as mobile internet hot spots for students with connectivity issues and parked at strategic locations on a predetermined schedule.

